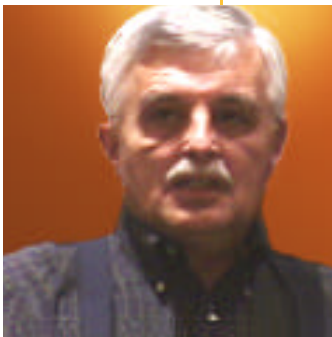


The Big Briefing by Terry Little

It was my first big briefing as a program manager, a program status briefing to some senior “big-wigs.” I was pretty comfortable because things were going well with the program’s technical progress and schedule. However, I was concerned about the amount of money we were spending.

Even though we were only about 20% of the way through the program, we had already spent about 30% of the money and there were some significant technical hurdles ahead of us. I debated what to say about this and finally concluded that I would just be candid about what I saw as an impending problem with having enough money to complete the program.



Terry Little

is in the civil service with the Department of the Air Force, where he has been a program manager for five major defense acquisition efforts. He entered the Air Force in 1967 and served on active duty until 1975. As a civilian employee, Mr. Little has been an operations research analyst, a program director for a classified program, a deputy program director for both a large, multiple-program office and a Navy-led joint program office, and a weapons development planning manager.

As my boss reviewed the briefing, it was evident that he was quite pleased with what I had to say until we got to the slide on the money problem. He looked at it for a moment and then turned to me and said, “You can’t tell them that!”

“Why not?” I replied. “It’s the truth.”

“I know it’s the truth,” he declared, “but you have to be careful how you phrase it. First, you need to tell them that having enough money to finish is a ‘challenge’ rather than a ‘problem.’ Don’t tell them how big the problem is. Then you need to tell them that you and the contractor are ‘working aggressively’ to get the costs in line with the work. If you don’t do that then your program will either become a problem that they will feel compelled to help you fix. Cancellation is not out of the realm of possibility. Neither one of us wants that to happen! And besides, we don’t know for sure that there really will be a money problem.”

I acquiesced to the changes my boss suggested. I gave the briefing and everyone was happy with how well the program was progressing. My boss congratulated me on the briefing and pointed out that the money slide had barely raised an eyebrow.

Two years later the money problem became obvious. But, by then, we had

accomplished enough and readily got the additional money we needed to finish the program.

Reflecting on what I had done, I wondered if the ends had justified the means. I hadn't lied (or at least I rationalized that I hadn't), but I had deliberately miscommunicated so that my audience wouldn't comprehend the import of what I was saying. I had "fuzzed-up" the message.

This happened many years ago. I have subsequently observed that what I had done is a practice that is all too common. Whether it's because of lack of confidence in senior management, an aversion to conflict, an example of the "bandwagon effect," or fear of being blamed ... I don't know. What I do know is that I was wrong.

I let down the senior leadership who had entrusted me with my position. I had compromised my integrity by not making sure that my audience clearly understood the true message. Luckily for my career, no one but me ever figured that out!



Editor's Note: Years later now, Mr. Little has become one of the most accomplished acquisition managers in the DoD and is currently a member of the Senior Executive Service.

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